PRESS RELEASE

The Cleveland Museum of Art

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THE ART OF BRONZE
July 13 - October 17, 1982

The art of creating sculpture and other objects from bronze is explained in this exhibition of more than forty bronze masterworks from the collections of The Cleveland Museum of Art. Drawn from the Museum's collections of ancient, early and later Western, modern, Islamic, and Oriental art are representations of mythological and religious figures, animals, portrait busts, medals, and a variety of useful objects, such as a doorknocker, candlestick, and lamp.

The works have been selected and arranged to illustrate the three stages in the making of bronze objects: casting; chasing (finishing the cast surface with special tools); and patination (altering the bronze surface by natural weathering or man-made chemicals, lacquers, or gildings). Two casting methods are included: the lost wax process and the piece-mold process.

In the lost wax process, the ancient but still most common method of bronze casting, a wax model of the object to be cast is covered with a claylike material, called an investment, which will become the mold. The investment is heated to harden the mold and melt the wax. When the wax drains off, the cavities left inside the mold are filled with molten bronze, which cools to form an exact image of the wax model. The lost wax method is explained through a series of models--from original sculpture to finished bronze--and through photographs showing step by step how the bronze was cast and finished in the foundry. The lost wax technique gives the sculptor great freedom of expression, enabling him to produce works of enormous size that are still light in weight as well as works of extreme intricacy and delicacy.

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An alternative method, the piece-mold process, was used by Chinese artisans of the Shang and Chou dynasties (ca. 16th century B.C. to 3rd century B.C.) to cast ceremonial vessels. They impressed designs on separate soft clay slabs which were hardened or baked and then interlocked around a clay core. Molten bronze was poured into the space between the core and the surrounding molds to form the vessel.

The complexity of composition and fine detail possible in bronze casting is apparent in many works in the exhibition. A splendid example is an Etruscan sculpture of the early 4th century B.C. showing the deities Sleep and Death carrying off the fallen Trojan warrior Sarpedon. The sculpture originally served as the handle on the cover of a cista, a large cylindrical box used to hold a woman's cosmetic objects. Another remarkable piece of casting is a Roman bust of a man dating from 40-30 B.C. in which the sculptor was able to reproduce the strong firm bone structure as well as the textures and wrinkles of flesh.

When a bronze is removed from the mold, it will have holes which must be filled and rough edges which must be chiseled or filed off. The object's surface may then be further refined and polished. The subtle textural effects that can be achieved in the chasing process are shown in an animated mule's head of Greek manufacture, 2nd century B.C., which once decorated a couch. A small but extremely realistic sculpture of a scratching dog, made in Germany in the 16th century, has carefully modeled anatomical details and is an outstanding example of both casting and finishing.

Over a long period of time, bronzes, particularly those that have been buried or under water, will acquire a colored encrustation or patina, caused by reaction of the bronze with oxygen, water, or chemicals in the soil. This natural corrosion, seen on ancient Oriental and classical bronzes in this exhibition, often enhances the beauty of the objects. An exquisitely modeled head of the goddess Athena which adorns a Greek mirror case from approximately 385 B.C. is more attractive for its jade-like blue-green patina.

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When Renaissance sculptors discovered classical bronzes and began to use them as models for their own sculpture, they also developed methods of imitating their patinas. The Renaissance statuettes in this exhibition were treated with chemical solutions or lacquers to produce rich brown or black patinas. Most modern bronzes, such as British sculptor Henry Moore's Family Group and Helmet Head, exhibited here, are finished with artificial patinas.

Bronzes have also been gilded in Oriental and Western cultures since ancient times. Two exceptionally fine bronzes in this exhibition are gilded: a German crucifix dating from the mid-12th century and a kneeling figure from the reliquary of Saint Germain, cast in Paris around 1409. One of the most attractive features of the Avalokiteshvara Padmapani, a Buddhist deity of Nepalese origin, ca. 11th to 12th century, is its natural golden brown color, but this sculpture too was once painted and gilded.

Selecting Museum masterworks for the exhibition and researching their production were James A. Birch, curator of the Department of Art History and Education, Andrew T. Chakalis, supervisor of the Extensions Division of that department, and David C. Ditner, assistant for research, Department of Later Western Art. Kim Bissett and Bill Leady of the Studio Foundry, Cleveland, Ohio, prepared the models and cast the bronze sculpture used in the demonstration of the lost wax method.

The Art of Bronze is installed in Gallery A, the exhibition area adjacent to the Museum cafeteria.

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For additional information or photographs, please contact the Public Relations Office, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44106; 216/421-7340.